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Wild milkfish abound in Australia's north coast

By **AP Surtida**

Good news to Asian milkfish farmers who are looking to buy milkfish broodstock and large quantities of fry. In a feature by Richard Mounsey in INFOFISH (Sept/Oct 1998 issue) the milkfish resource in the central north coast of Australia appears to be virtually unexploited. It is just waiting to be caught and utilized. Highlights of Mounsey's report:

Barramundi fisheries in Darwin, Australia continuously catch large milkfish in their 150 to 175 mm mesh gill nets and nearly all of them unrecorded and released at sea since no viable market yet exist.

At a fish feeding site in the heart of Darwin, wild milkfish along with mullet are the dominant species fed on the high tide. It attracts thousands of tourists and locals each year. Each visitor can even hand-fed up to 1,000 wild milkfish with stale bread. The fish are often a meter long and weight from 6 to 16 kilograms each.

Only a tiny amount of immature milkfish are landed by coastal net license holders and are sold locally to the small Filipino community in Darwin.

In July 1996, representatives of a Darwin based fishing company, attended the *Agri-Aqua Fair* in Davao City, Philippines, They found out that the most lucrative species of fish covered at the fair was milkfish. Company representatives prior to the fair had little knowledge or interest in milkfish. However, after being informed by a Northern Territory Fisheries Officer that milkfish are common along the northern territory coast they quickly set about undertaking an exploratory investigation into the milkfish industries of the Philippines and eastern Indonesia. A year long study found out the severe shortage of quality milkfish fry throughout Asia. Both the Philippines and Indonesia had severely reduced the wild population of milkfish.

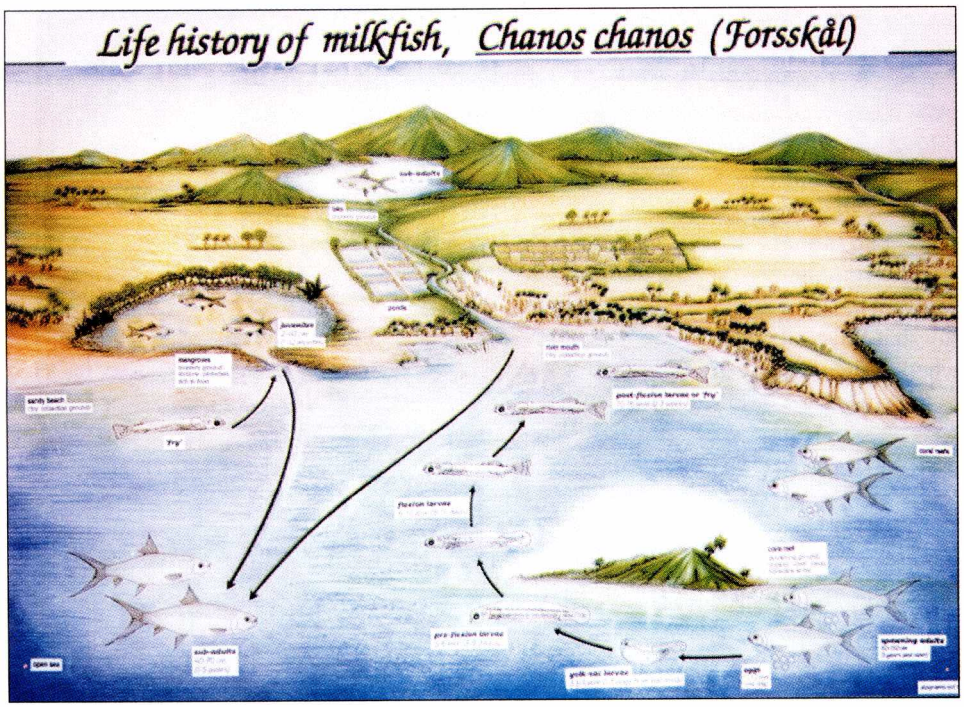
A lack of fry in the wild meant that mature fish had also vanished and hatcheries were forced to grow fish to replace their aging broodstock. This was and still is causing in-breeding and diseases problems and is a major concern to breeders and farmers alike.

With prawn farming in the doldrums, many Asian farmers are turning to milkfish as the only viable alternative and therein lies the problem of scarcity of quality fry.

The study concluded that fry taken from the pristine waters off northern Australia would be well accepted by Asian farmers. In addition, mature milkfish herded into seawater enclosures and induced to spawn would produce similar high-grade marketable fry.

The next stage of the project, which was to transport and spawn milkfish in ponds, has been put on hold due to the currency crisis gripping Indonesia, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian nations.

Although there has been considerable interest from Asian companies looking to buy broodstock or large quantities of fry, present exchange rate makes business not viable at the moment. A wait-and-see approach is being adopted by the company.



The **life cycle of milkfish** has been drawn up by SEAFDEC/AQD scientist Teodora Bagarinao who conducted extensive studies of milkfish biology and ecology in the '80s.

The milkfish life cycle poster, sized 83 x 61 cm, is available from AQD. Email <sales@aqd.seafdec.org.ph>